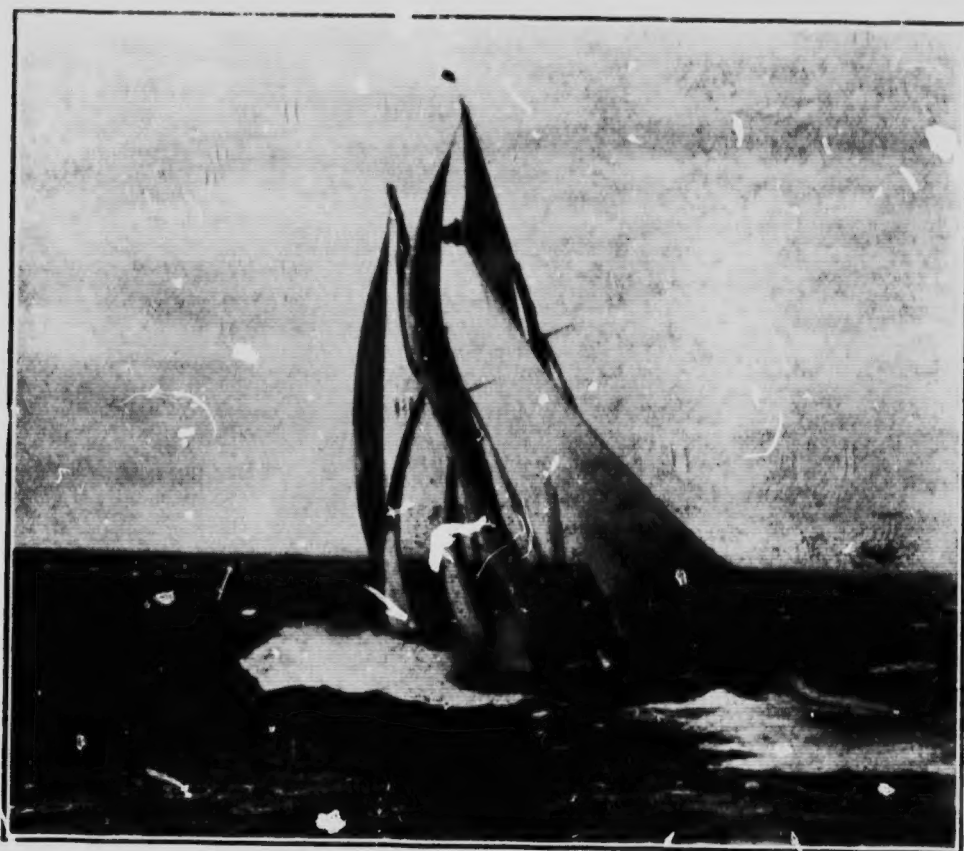


THE
CHRISTMAS VOYAGE
OF THE
HANDY LASS.

by
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"THE BRAVE LITTLE VESSEL . . . FIGHTING FOR EVERY INCH"

The Christmas Voyage of the Handy Lass.

The good schooner *Handy Lass* had sailed once more for the Labrador, taking with her all the hopes, and most of the possessions of Uncle Solomon Anstey. The bread and butter for his whole large family depended on this annual venture. The ice this spring had been the latest on record. The very oldest resident "had never even heard from his grandfather of the Straits being blocked in August." There had not been twenty four hours clear of drift ice since Skipper Solomon left Icy Tickle.

With him, for their first long trip were his two oldest boys, Lige and Ben. Each was to have a man's half share out of the voyage; and big indeed they had felt, as in their new blue guernseys and sea boots they had waved good-bye to the "children" left with their mother to tend the garden and home.

Week after week the ice held on. The time for the capelin school had come and gone, and when one day we happened to board the *Handy Lass*, we almost believed Uncle Solomon was discouraged..

"No, de lar, believe me. We've ne'er a fish under salt yet, and I'm nearly runned up for trapping a' ready, but the good Lord knows best for we," he added guiltily, and I caught his eye as he looked round to see if I had noticed the nearest approach to quarreling with the Almighty's dealings that I had ever seen him display.

"You'll have to go further North and stay later, Uncle Solomon," I replied. "But you don't mind the ice. I've seen you hauling the anchor chain without a mitt on, long after the hour had been 'caught over.'"

"That's right enough, doctor. It's them at home I'm thinkin' on. There's five little ones beside 'Lige and Ben, and them do eat a power o' vittles."

Three months afterwards, our own hospital steamer had gone into winter quarters. The ice was already making in all the coves; and the fleet had gone south. Late one evening a belated vessel, flying no less than three somewhat tattered flags, anchored in the roadstead. She was veritably "bringing up the keel of the Labrador." It did not take us long with the glasses from the balcony of our house, to make out the lines and the rigging of the *Handy Lass*. She was log loaded, and, being driven in for shelter on her way south, had hoisted all her hunting to emphasize that fact for our information.

"Well, Uncle Solomon," I exclaimed, as the radiant features of my old friend welcomed me over the rail, "So you've done it after all."

"Yes, t'ank God," he answered. "Ask and it shall be given; seek and ye shall find; and we found them north of Gulch Cove, when the ice was already making on the meshes of night. But we'm in some trouble doctor; and I'm real glad it was fixed for we to cal' in and see you. Ben here has been ailin' the last month and us can see nothin' t' matter. I'd just like to have you look at him."

An examination made even in the deep, dark bunk of a small schooner revealed the need for immediate operation.

"There's trouble in his appendix. That's his stomach you know. You should have him taken right up to the hospital for operation. We can send him home by the last mail boat. She runs from here till January; and if she doesn't get along that trip, we'll keep him till spring."

"It's as you say's, doctor."

So the following morning the schooner sailed away, leaving the veritable Benjamin of the crew in our hands. Fortunately, things went well. Ben made a good re-

covery, and it was only the early ice preventing the steamer getting into our harbour that was keeping him with us.

Day by day slipped by, and no westerly gale came to clear the coast of the young "slob." Our older patients took little notice of the fact that the steamer had failed to "reach North" on her second fortnightly December trip. The vagaries of our weather had made them stoical. But Ben was like the master watch who cannot find the seal patch in March. Nothing would satisfy him that he could exist away from home for Christmas, especially with that "half-share" awaiting him.

At last came Christmas Eve, and with it all the preparations the good nurses always make for that occasion. Ben was mystified at the "spruce bough being brought right into the house." The gay bunting in all the wards was a new experience to him. It fairly forced him to be interested. "What's un for, Miss?" he asked the nurse many times, as he gazed at the various decorations. To his utilitarian mind, money spent, except on necessities, was wasted on "that which profiteth not." The feeling of secrecy that pervaded the whole atmosphere so fascinated him that he forgot his troubles; and when Christmas Day was over, and all its festivities, including the fun of a real Santa Claus, who had brought him a beautiful pocket knife, he caught the spirit of the rest, and gave himself up to a very riot of entertainment.

At length, however, the long expected westerly gales came. All but the standing ice was scattered over the ocean's face, and the plucky little mail boat once more forced a passage to our doors and Ben at last betook himself to the bosom of his family.

It was not till the following fall that I again met with Uncle Solomon. The fleet is large, and fishing grounds scattered, and somehow in the journeys of the early summer, we failed to run across the *Handy Lass*. So when one day we descried her working north among half a dozen other craft, we steamed up under her lee, and hailed the watch.

Uncle was summoned on deck, and when he saw us alongside, he at once hove his vessel to the wind and invited us to drop a boat to come aboard. We were keen enough to catch a glimpse of our last winter's patient, but more so to hear what Uncle Solomon's views were on the saving of his boy's life.

It was Ben himself, strong and hearty, who was standing watch and he literally fell all over us, as we climbed aboard. It would have done any landsman good to have felt the grip which Uncle Solomon always gives either friend or stranger.

"So, you got your Benjamin back safely, Skipper?"

"Why, yes, t'ank God, Doctor. He done a good winter's work."

I was wondering how a modern surgical operation had impressed him, and so asked. "Don't you think it strange that we were able to cut him open and put our hands right into him?"

"Well, I've been splitting cod fish these forty years now, Doctor, and sometimes I mostly thinks I could split a man. But you's right about the sewing up. Doctor, there be one thing that Ben never stops talking about, and that be's the times they had at Christmas. An old spruce all ablaze, he says, like the burning bush, and presents on it for everyone. You can't stop him Doctor, and nothin' will satisfy him now but us must have one like it come Christmas."

The dream seemed destined to be realized. Once again the old skipper "struck t' fish." "Got right in among 'em" as he informed me later. And so, reaching home with a "bumper voyage," he reckoned he'd carry it to St. John's himself, and sell it straight to the big merchants." "They gives more than the small peddlers," he explained as an excuse for this departure from the time-immemorial custom of bartering it with a trader.

Uncle Solomon's judgment was more than justified by his experiences in St. John's. "Why they'd as soon give cash as trade" he reported "And it is beyond all, the way them peddlers in the shops looks at a bit o' cash." His earning, to his surprise and joy, reached far beyond the mere common "heavy stuffs" that form the staples of life in most of the fishermen's cottages. Some cocoa and milk were added and then "some of the American tinned meat," which they adore, and a few other small luxuries. Even then Uncle Solomon was not easy, for there still lay in his unaccustomed pocket—a bag of dollars "that be no use in the winter in Icy Tickle."

So a consultation was held with the "officers" on board the *Handy Lass*, among whom 'Lige and Ben were privileged to sit. The presumptive problem was "What shall us do with the balance coming to we," but the real question at issue in Uncle Solomon's mind was "Should they have a Christmas tree." It is wonderful how strongly one determined member can swing a jury. It was true, Ben was the junior member. But with him conviction was so strong, and the rest were so undecided as to what was best, that a serious effort for a combined Christmas tree, the first ever held in Icy Tickle, was finally agreed upon.

Weird packages assorted and numerous soon crowded the small storage space in the *Handy Lass's* after cupboards, for the ship was log loaded, both below and on deck. Private corners, long hallowed by custom for tobacco tins and special oddments, were cheerfully resigned for mysterious paper bags. No spot was sacred, and Uncle Solomon was once very near to complaining when he reached out and found his little pet store of smoking materials had been "tidied up," and only a soft pudgy bag greeted his anticipatory fingers.

"A southerly wind and a cloudless sky betokened a sailing morning" and it was with hearts as light as their pockets that they at last let go their shore hawsers, swung off into the stream, cat-headed the anchor, and steered out into the open, with the *Handy Lass's* jib-boom pointing "northward ho".

Uncle Solomon told me later, "Boys will be boys, but them lads was fair beyond all." Ben was for hanging some of the packages on the cross trees, and even the sober-minded mate, Uriah, seriously considered 'Lige's suggestion to call into Sleepy Cove on the way "down north" and get some spruce boughs to fix up the main-mast. "Why folks would have thought us was ruined, and the ship were for sale," said Uncle Solomon, "or else that us were over-proud and thought us could sweep t' seas. But still, Doctor, you knows there be them in Icy Tickle what has never seed St. John's, and they old folk be easy upset, when 'em hasn't seed the world. There'd have been talk enough about we as it were, for Ben had lashed a large animal they calls a "Steady Bear" onto the bobstay, unbeknownst to us, in St. John's harbour.

The dog watch was over—the first watch was set for the night. The schooner was just airing along on her voyage north over an almost oily sea, and all hands were sitting on the rail yarning about the great time they would have at Christmas. They were keeping it up so long that Skipper Solomon had just come up on deck to order the watch below to turn in, fearing that they would sleep on their watch—a real danger on these moonless nights in December with the ice about.

Suddenly without any warning, like a bolt from the blue, something struck the vessel, as if it had been the hammer of Thor. Like a wild animal taken unawares, the *Handy Lass* seemed to make one great leap into the air, throwing every man off his feet. There followed a terrible moment of horror, and yet of hope. The men by the lee bulwarks were already in the water, but the skipper grasped the mainsheet block as he fell, and was holding on for dear life. Against the clear sky he could see the weather rail rising up and up and up as the ship canted more and more over. Under the fearful pressure of the wind she was being slowly driven down, much as the giant Gaul forced the bull to earth with his mighty strength. The brave little vessel was like a live thing,

fighting for every inch. She seemed to be making one supreme struggle for life, and now it almost looked as if she were gaining; so much so that though the deck was already nearly perpendicular, the skipper, clinging to the block, had time to get out his jack-knife, hoping to cut the main sheet, and so ease the pressure from the main sail. Could he have done it, the ship might still have been saved. But it was not so ordained. Before he could sever a single strand, a second blow struck the vessel. She reeled, staggered, hung for one brief moment, and then fell over.

How it all happened, and how anyone ever managed to escape from beneath the ruin, no one will ever be able to explain. There was an awful crash, a roar of falling cargo, a fearful moment of utter black darkness below the cold waters, a struggle to get clear of wreckage, and then each man, grasping some hatch or board or loose case, found himself floating in the darkness in that frigid sea. It has often been said that our fishermen are like limpets, such is their power of clinging on. All their lives they are grasping and hauling; and shaking hands in the dark, you can easily recognize a fisherman, by his heavy, bent hand, which never straightens quite out as does a land lubber's.

There is no need to make apologies, however, for their strength and endurance and courage now serve each man well. The *Handy Lass* was lying flat on her side, unable to rise owing to her shifted cargo, and the sea was pouring into her hatches. Uncle Solomon was the first to get clear of the water. He had crawled up on the vessel's side like a cat, going hand over hand along the lanyards, and was now lying out on the starboard bilge, clinging fast to the after channel plates. Instinctively he at once began calling out to his men, and as he told me himself, was more than surprised to hear so many answering. An awful sense of utter loneliness had gripped him like a vice, but it was soon all forgotten as he worked his way fore and aft to help his struggling lads into temporary safety.

Almost before they had all assembled on the boat's bottom, the cyclone had vanished. There was scarcely a cloud in the sky and hardly a wave on the sea; only a sullen resentful roll, as if Father Neptune himself was growling because old Boreas had played him so scurvy a trick.

"Keep up your hearts, lads," said Uncle Solomon. "The Lord has brought us through so far. May be he'll save us out of this yet." Every man in the crew acquits him of even a trace of complaining this time. "Keep up your hearts. T' boat seems gone, but I 'lows we can make shift for a raft, if she floats long enough." With that he started crawling out along the rigging, hoping he might cut loose the main gaff from the sail, and so have something to start on. Meanwhile the mate did the same along the mizzen.

To the shivering lads on the vessel's side it seemed ages, but Solomon says it wasn't two minutes, as he groped his way out over the water, before he discovered that the ship's dory had broken from her lashings, and was floating upside down under the mainsail. To how many men, at such a time, and in such a plight would this have meant anything? It did not take Uncle Solomon long to see its possibilities. With his clasp-knife, fast now to his wrist with a piece of spunyard for fear it might be knocked from his grasp, he began his perilous task. Abandoning his hold on the more solid rigging, he flung himself into the half-sunken body of the sail, and half swimming and half wading, he succeeded in crawling up and lying out on the dory's bottom. By clever manœuvering, he managed to cut away the canvas all along the dory, which eventually bobbed up through, and as dories will, immediately turned right over, and lay there, full to the brim of water.

All hands knew from his constant calling what he was doing, and long before he had finished, the boys had cut and undone a halyard and flung one end for him to make fast by.

To bail her out was now the only difficulty. Once that could be done, there remained at least a chance for their lives. But one thing they had already realized, and that was that there was not much time left them. The water was fast reaching up the side of their brave little craft, and they all knew well that a few minutes more, and her efforts to help them in their need must come to an end forever.

"Quick Ri! Quick, boys!" fairly yelled Uncle Solomon, who had already hauled off his big sea boots, and forced one into the mate's hands. "Bail for your lives. We must get clear before th' ship sinks, or she'll carry us all with her."

Now began a veritable race for life. Then in the dark, in that sunken dory, which was only kept upright by a fast settling vessel, were five men bailing out water with their sea boots, working with all their might, for life itself hung on the issue.

"You're gaining on her, boys; you're gaining! Let her have it! T' seats only is awash now; t'rail's free. She'll float us in another minute! Keep at it; it'll keep you from freezing! Bail away!" And such like encouragement slipped off Uncle Solomon's tongue, as if he had been born to the rôle of orator. In the face of real danger he had neither desire nor time for complaints. Suddenly like thunder, "Leave it to the boys Ri!" he shouted. "Cut the oars loose: they're lashed under the thwarts! Push off! Push off! We're all safe now, but keep bailin' boys! keep bailin'. Then so that only the mate could hear, "She'll be gone in a second Ri, push as you love your life."

Even as he spoke something came up from the sea beneath, and lifted the boat they were in almost out of water. Had she not still been partly waterlogged, Uncle Solomon says they must have all capsized again. As it was the after leach rope of the mainsail scraped all along the bottom, and lifting their bow, as they finally slipped off into clear water, it nearly sent them all down stern foremost.

Then for a moment though it might have cost them their lives, every man stopped bailing. For slowly the *Handy Lass* righted herself for the last time. Mizzen and mainmast, with all canvas set, were uncannily carried up into the sky out of that horrible darkness, and the great gap in the mainsail through which the dory had come grinned at them all, just for the moment like the evil eye. As they looked the stern went down deeper and deeper, and kept throwing the jib boom more and more vertically upright, till at last nothing was visible above the surface but the bowsprit and its rigging. Then slowly and stubbornly that sank too, and vanished out of sight beneath the icy waters.

"Ben did you see it?" cried 'Lige.

"Deed I did. It was grinning like Satan."

"Sure it seemed to put up its hand to wave good bye to us."

"Put up its finger to its nose," answered Ben.

They had so completely forgotten the danger, the fact that they were still up to their knees in water, and that they might go down any minute.

"Quit foolin' boys, and bail as hard as you can!" shouted Uncle Solomon, as he worked unceasingly himself.

"What did you see, anyhow? There was nothing but the old ship."

"Sure there was," answered 'Lige, though he was now keeping time with his father, as they worked at the water in the boat.

"Sure, Ben's 'Steady bear' climbed right out and sat on the end of the bobstay, as the *Handy Lass* went down."

Steering by the stars, which seemed to be friendly watchers of their efforts, and continually bailing and rowing to keep all hands occupied, they made good progress, so that before the day broke, the land loomed

up only some four or five miles distant. Fearing that any minute a breeze of wind might spring up, they never slacked for a second, and an hour or two later they landed in a little cove at the bottom of the bay quite strange to them, and with no inhabitants. A blazing fire was soon under way, for Uncle Solomon's water-tight match-box was the only rival in his affections of his pocket Bible. Then a few miles of following the coast-line, brought them to a lonely house.

A whole week elapsed before they succeeded in reaching a port where they could find a chance to get a passage for Icy Tickle, and before they finally arrived, the "mothers and wives were most despairing."

No, there was no Christmas tree, either that year or the next at Icy Tickle. They had lost too much in the wreck to let them think of more than bread and butter for many a day.

"But," said Uncle Solomon, "Doctor, my missus says she's got a Christmas present all right. It was me and t' boys that t' Lord give her back. And with that He taught me too not to have a complainin' mind because us didn't have all t'things t'others has. 'T is a grand thing to be alive; better'n havin' things. And us has nearly finished the new *Handy Lass* now, Doctor."

I couldn't help smiling as he finished his tale, for after a short pause he added, "But we'm be goin' to have a Christmas tree one o' them days all t' same."

111

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